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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 003799

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: JA'JA' CONFIDENT THAT MARCH 14 WILL
PREVAIL, MUSES ON AN AOUN PRESIDENCY

REF: BEIRUT 03789

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Lebanese Forces leader Ja'ja' expressed confidence that a compromise is possible that would preserve the pro-reform movement and a democratic Lebanon, but it would require resolute handling of the serious challenge launched by Hizballah last week. Although he discussed the Arab League initiative, the Patriarch's Statement for Dialogue, and a possible mediation effort by the Saudi government, Ja'ja' said the surest way to resolve the current crisis is to retrieve Michel Aoun from the grasp of Nasrallah, but that may require giving him what he covets above all -- the presidency. Ja'ja' was dispassionate about the prospect of an Aoun presidency, blandly stating the former general would certainly be unreliable and unpredictable, but rationalized that it would almost assuredly break the current stalemate and allow the country to move forward with a still viable (albeit diluted) Siniora government. (We note, however, that he seemed unconvinced by his own arguments and later contradicted himself.) Concerning demonstrations, Ja'ja' was markedly less confrontational than one of his advisors had indicated earlier this week, and said that while the potential remained for confrontation, particularly on December 12 when the Siniora cabinet will meet on the anniversary of the assassination of MP Gibran Tuani only a block away from Hizballah's on-going demonstrations, he was confident the LAF could and would provide the necessary level of security. In terms of assistance, Ja'ja' asked the U.S. to press its ally Saudi Arabia to exert pressure on Syria and, in words almost identical to PM Siniora, to reconsider the issue of Shebaa Farms as a means to corner and ultimately disarm Hizballah. End summary.

2. (C) Samir Ja'ja' and one of his advisors, Elie Khoury, met with the Ambassador and emboff at his heavily-guarded retreat in north Lebanon on December 8. It was evident throughout the nearly two-hour meeting that the Lebanese Forces leader was confident about the chances for Lebanon's pro-reform movement to dodge yet another (Syrian) bullet. At times it seemed that the former Phalange militia leader, long-time death row prisoner, and now (almost) rehabilitated pro-democratic leader was using the Ambassador as a sounding board, trying out possible solutions to the latest crisis to confront Lebanon. He is clearly in close communication, not only with his March 14 allies, but with some of the March 8 leadership as well. Rather than the cold-blooded militia

leader his archenemies often describe (and the killer he undisputedly once was), Ja'ja' in his political meetings comes across as almost philosophical in his approach to problem solving and is not adverse to thinking outside the box. The overriding impression from this meeting was one of quiet confidence that Hizballah and its Syrian/Iranian masters could be bested.

ADVICE FOR THE U.S.

13. (C) Ja'ja' listened with evident satisfaction to the message that the findings of the recent Iraq Study Group did not presage an approach to Syria that would jeopardize Lebanon's sovereignty. On the contrary, it was explained to the Lebanese Forces leader that the report recommended definite preconditions before any U.S.-Syrian dialogue could commence, most importantly, clear evidence that Syria has ceased its destabilizing meddling in Lebanese affairs. More importantly, President Bush has rejected dialogue with Syria and will not trade away Lebanon. Ja'ja' did, however, express concern when warned that one or more congressional delegations may include Damascus on their schedules. Ja'ja' stated that the insular Syrian regime routinely misinterpreted such attention as validation of their misguided policies, rather than hearing the intended repudiation. He said visits by U.S. officials, combined with the often supine behavior by European emissaries, embolden the Syrians and usually make life much more difficult for Lebanon.

14. (C) But the veteran politician said he understood the realities of diplomacy. Ja'ja' did, however, urge the U.S.

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to issue a sharp, clearly worded rebuke to Syria that continued interference in Lebanon would have considerable and long-lasting consequences. Ja'ja' also suggested that the good offices of the Saudis be energized in warning Syria to cease and desist its hostile activities. More than any other Arab country, Syria fears the economic and political power of Saudi Arabia. A subtle, but firm warning from the rulers of Arabia that continued Syrian destabilization would result in painful penalties (e.g. expulsion of Syrian workers from the kingdom, closure of the Syrian/Arabian border, forfeiture of access to Saudi financial resources) may give the Asad regime pause more than would similar threats from the West.

15. (C) In particular, Ja'ja' urged the U.S. to dissuade the Saudis from listening to Nabih Berri's advice that the Saudis should re-establish warmer relations with the Asad regime in what would be a "misguided" attempt to moderate Syrian behavior. Ja'ja' warned the effect would be just the opposite with the Syrians, who in his experience are amazingly adept at getting things backward. As for the Arab League initiative that Amr Moussa is shopping around the diplomatic circuit, Ja'ja' felt its emphasis on re-initiating dialogue couldn't hurt, but that in the end the crisis in Lebanon could only be solved by reconfiguring the political line-up, and that meant prying Michel Aoun from the astute manipulations of Hassan Nasrallah.

PRESIDENT AOUN -- PLUSES AND MINUSES

16. (C) In an unexpected turn, Ja'ja' rhetorically asked what would be the disadvantages of an Aoun presidency. He remarked that it would certainly be characterized by unpredictability, but that Aoun would probably surprise Nasrallah as often as he would Siniora. Ja'ja' is convinced that Nasrallah simply doesn't trust the former general, and far from wanting his ascent to the presidency, is actually quite anxious about such a development. A second undesirable trait of Aoun is his unreliability. Ja'ja' indicated it wasn't necessary to review all the changes of heart Aoun has had over the years, but again this unreliability would

undoubtedly cut both ways -- making the Syrians who supposedly helped him to power ultimately unsure about whether Aoun would dance to their tune.

¶17. (C) On the other side of the ledger, Ja'ja' stated that Aoun's best selling point was that he wasn't the Syrian puppet Lahoud. Despite his isolation in the near empty halls of Baabda, Lahoud has effectively used the quirky Lebanese constitution to great effect -- hamstringing Siniora at nearly every turn to prevent badly needed economic and political reforms. Aoun, on the other hand, has made a cottage industry out of his criticism that the government should be replaced because it is incompetent and has very little to show for nearly 20 months in power. In Ja'ja's view, Aoun would find it exceedingly difficult to be the same obstructionist as Lahoud, without losing much of his platform and popular support.

¶18. (C) When asked if Aoun could be mollified if he were allowed to influence, perhaps even control, the selection of Lebanon's next president, Ja'ja only smiled and repeated a now-famous Aoun quote, "...why choose a copy, when the original is standing before you." Ja'ja felt that only attainment of the presidency would convince Aoun to step away from his alliance with Hizballah, but he was certain if it was indeed offered to the 73-year old war-horse, Aoun would switch with amazing alacrity.

¶19. (C) Almost as if he were engaged in a dialogue with himself, Ja'ja turned pensive and commented that six years of President Aoun would be a "remarkably long time." But then immediately followed with the conviction that the idea should not be dismissed out of hand due to its obvious benefits. It was clear that Ja'ja' has been mulling this possibility for some time when he stated that not only was his protege, MP George Adwan, in regular communication with Aoun, but that he himself maintained "other channels" with his principal adversary in the Christian community. But when the Ambassador asked later in the conversation about the presidency, Ja'ja' said that it was probably better to avoid a compromise president immediately and wait instead for an opportunity to elect someone of integrity like Nassib Lahoud.
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THE COMING WEEK

¶10. (C) In marked contrast to the dire analysis offered up by his advisor Elie Khoury on December 5 (reftel), Samir Ja'ja' was remarkably sanguine about the outcome of two critical days fast approaching: Sunday, December 10 - the date on which Hassan Nasrallah has called for a "massive" show of force by the March 8 alliance, and Tuesday, December 12 - the anniversary of the assassination of MP Gibran Tueni, when the opposing camps will have large numbers of supporters in extremely close quarters in downtown Beirut.

¶11. (C) The former militia leader plainly stated he was not seeking confrontation with Hizballah's mob. He stated with aplomb that both camps would demonstrate peacefully and was confident the LAF would capably maintain public order. Although he admitted that December 12 could be more problematic, Ja'ja' pointed out that General Michel Sleiman's LAF had already proved their reliability and he did not anticipate any change in the coming days and weeks.

¶12. (C) In fact, Ja'ja' unexpectedly said he believed the March 8 demonstrations were beginning to fray around the edges and he expected that the soon-to-arrive (and, in reality, already delayed) cold, wet weather would greatly accelerate the melting of Hizballah's crowds in Riad Solh square. Rather than feeling anxious over Nasrallah's ranting televised speech of Thursday evening, Ja'ja' said he interpreted the slashing attacks as signs that Nasrallah

himself is anxious that his campaign to topple the Siniora government may be wavering, without any sign that Siniora has moved an inch.

¶13. (C) Samir Ja'ja' even expressed nonchalance toward the critical December 12 cabinet meeting that will presumably approve and pass to parliament the decree authorizing the establishment of the Special Tribunal. Although this meeting will be held outside the relative safety of the Grand Serail in a building only blocks from Hizballah's supporters, Ja'ja' once again said the LAF was more than up to the task. Ja'ja' seemed supremely confident that Hizballah would be compelled to keep its word that their crowds would be disciplined and non-violent.

STRATEGY FOR THE SPECIAL TRIBUNAL

¶14. (C) Ja'ja' explained his strategy for getting the Special Tribunal through the next wickets. Rather than trying to force a supremely reluctant and unhelpful Nabih Berri into convening a special session of parliament, Ja'ja' said he would advise PM Siniora to push the process as far as it could go -- and then make a direct appeal to the Security Council itself for the last few steps of the journey. Specifically, PM Siniora would proceed as planned with his December 12 cabinet meeting at which he would receive the constitutionally-mandated simple majority approval from his remaining ministers.

¶15. (C) At that point, Siniora would submit the decree to parliament and, faced with certain inaction from the Hizballah-controlled Speaker, make a direct appeal to the UN Security Council. The Prime Minister's letter to the Secretary General would state that "due to political impasse"

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the government of Lebanon was asking for the previously-authorized assistance of the Council in the establishment of the tribunal. This GOL request would presumably meet the requirements of previously reluctant Council members who did not want to move on the issue unless the GOL itself had initiated a request.

¶16. (C) However, Ja'ja' insisted it was extremely important that PM Siniora have assurances that his request would be favorably received by the Council members (or at least not vetoed) before he took the considerable risk involved. The Ambassador stated he would consult with Washington and return with an answer early next week.

OTHER PLANNED MOVES

¶17. (C) Ja'ja' stated that March 14 wasn't standing still

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while the March 8 bloc was grabbing all the headlines. The pro-reform movement was actively wooing the 2-seat parliamentary bloc of the Armenian-affiliated Tashnaq party. Even though it was a small number of seats, a switch to the March 14 bloc would be doubly effective, because up until the present, the two deputies had been voting with the Aoun bloc.

¶18. (C) Ja'ja' also indicated the March 14 alliance was assiduously working with Maronite Patriarch Sfeir to be bolder in his pro-democratic pronouncements and efforts to promote dialogue. But most of all, Ja'ja' assured the U.S. that March 14 was resolute and confident that democratic Lebanon would survive. He closed with the surprising remark that he didn't believe Nasrallah really had a definite plan following his "massive" protest on December 10, stating, "he has an objective, but he really doesn't know his next steps after Sunday" implying the widely-feared Nasrallah may have badly slipped up.

FELTMAN